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Views over the Sound. Imagining (Northern) Isles as grounds for narratives of becoming non-modern.

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This co-authored essay provides a conclusion to the collection and draws together various strands within it – i.e. in exploring what islands offer in terms of being non-modern at the intersection of visual perception, landscape (and other older traditions explored in works of and on visual culture), along with autobiographical approaches to situatedness as prevalent in more recently engaging concerns with ecology. Joined autotopographical methodologies are appropriate here because this enables a sense of the affective nature of islands, and what they offer for being situated in a non-modern way, which can only come out through subjective interrogations of what it means physically to be on an island, and the non-modern nature of such an embodiment, or positioning. This is written collectively as ‘we’ with some moments of individual voice, indicated by OJ or LD, as we converse and reflect on our individual experiences on Northern and other Isles which nevertheless share interests in the autotopological, the affective and the creatively non-representational.

I find my favourite place: a slab of rock balanced at a precarious angle at the top of a cliff. I'd come here as a teenager, headphones on dressed up and frustrated, looking out to the horizon, wanting to escape. [Now] On a clear day, south across the Pentland Firth, I can see the tips of the mountains of mainland Scotland: [] Ben Hope, Ben Loyal, Cape Wrath. About the horizon's distance due west of the Outrun lies Sule Skerry [] I look north to the headland at Marwick. (Amy Liptrot, *The Outrun*, 2016 p 3- 4).

Introduction

We have long had Romantic and creatively inflected imaginings of islands and island life – particularly the seemingly remote wilder Northern isles. Spells of artistic residency (LD) and recent visits to a few have not disavowed us of such – but possibly deepened them, and mixed a series of remembered views into the creative milieu which is the interplay of imagination and memory in the practices of becoming and the practices of ‘representing’ such becomings,

Particularly powerful memories (some now supported by photographs and field notes) are the views across the sounds of the northern isles, such as those that separated Skye and

Lindisfarne from the mainland, and the differing isles of Orkney (OJ), of views and passages engendered by visits and work residencies on Skye, Barra and other Hebridean Islands (LD).

These sounds - sometimes their wind and wave textured surface light, tones and patterns, traversed by the compounding textures of a ferry's wake, with the far shore, perhaps, hazily in view - speak of nearness and remoteness; of here and there; now and then; possibilities closing off – and others excitingly opening; of passages (journeys) once made, to be made, not to be made. As our opening quote from Liptrot's recent book on returning to Orkney to live and recover – views off islands are a key part of island becoming.

To us these are resonantly affective views – and sonic 'scapes' - speaking somehow of life that can or could be other – outside 'mainland' conventions. Such views of islands, and being on them, prompts us to think of them as particular relational, practiced, processual, spaces which merit consideration from 'non-representational' perspectives which stress forms of creative enquiry with an emphasis of affective becoming. The drive to develop (academic) languages to articulate such affective becoming in space is well underway, but still emergent, (See John Wylie 2012 on the landscape writings of Tim Robinson). The interplay of imagination and memory in the practices of becoming requires us to build an internalised archive (complete with a relatively random cataloguing system) that we continue to build upon and reflect up.

I (LD) am thinking of my very recent return trip to Barra (60 miles from the 'main' mainland). This was my third visit and I found myself returning to the physical spaces where over the years my memory and my imagination has lingered. Would Vatersay beach still be that expanse of white sand and sparkling sea water, warmed by the Gulf Stream? Well, yes, and no. The Gulf Stream seems to be slowing down, but the beach remains, although Vatersay is no longer an island off an island off an island – it is now linked to 'mainland' Barra by a causeway. Can you still camp in the dunes around the beach that serves as a runway? No, you can't. Does it always rain on the ferry crossing to Eriskay? (an island now connected to 'mainland' Lewis by yet another causeway). Yes, it seems to! This internalised archive is in a state of perpetual becoming, not least because I will never stop going back, both literally and in my memory, and the questions I ask of places I already know comes from the capacity to archive sensation in such a way as to trigger echoes of that sensation.

The process amplifies the wisdom of Massey's notion of a 'simultaneity of stories so far' (Massey 2005) when one considers both individual and collective life in space.

Perhaps my (OJ) most intimate knowledge of an island is that of Caldey (Pembrokeshire; South Wales) where I have visited on many occasions, and looked upon many, many more times. And also the three islands of the mid Severn Estuary, Flat Holm, Steep Holm and Denny Isle, which I have gazed upon even more. And in part my Romantic notions stem from that, these all were, and Caldey remains, islands of (religious) retreat, myths of hermits and small, isolated military garrisons, Caldey still being home to a Cistercian monastery. Islands seem to set people in differing relations to time and space and nature – nature as manifested in combinations of the sea, light, weather, flora and fauna, other visible lands, the all-important sea horizon, local cultures/practices.

Of course Romanticism was and is set against the enlightenment and modernity, and we still need to be travelling away from the very unfortunate political, social, theological, economic and technical settlements of that era, which have in combination, as Guattari has it, ushered in the 'ecocide' (2000) of the three ecologies (natural, social/cultural, psychological). In this view, the rich diversities of alternative cultures (languages, local customs, forms of local production and consumption) are being degraded and extinguished by industrialised globalised capitalism (in relation to others forces such as human exceptionalism, certain ideologies of the self and theology) in the same way that biodiversity is in terms of habitat loss, species loss and so on. And often highly distinct combinations of these two – such as some northern isle community's use of once plentiful seabirds and their eggs for food (and ways of harvesting them). If islands seem to have an affective charge in relation to place, space and time, and (thus) airs of possible alternative settlements of nature-culture, this is part of their fascination.

There is a cosmopolitan aspect to island populations, historically and now. This is in part due to the fact that islands act as magnets to many different sorts of people, but also because in order to survive an island has to be outward looking in its very nature. For up to twenty weeks of the year, up to five hundred new, short term visitors arrive on Barra every day. Some stay on. And settled islanders leave. This high turnover of people is fraught with many problems associated with intense tourism, but it does bring with it the possibility of ideas exchange around what might constitute a possible alternative settlement. The electric car

charging point at the ferry terminal comes to mind, as does the increase in children choosing to be taught primarily through the medium of Gaelic, up from twenty in 1985 to 3583 in 2004.

The Bare Fact of an Island

The bare fact of an island - an area of land surrounded by sea, offers affordances (both physical and imaginary), due to the nature of terrestrial non-aerial life's difficulties of dealing with movement across, and through, water. In the classic post-apocalypse novel the *Day of the Triffids* by John Wyndham, the only possible space for a successful settlement by UK survivors of the opening cataclysm is, eventually, on an island (The Isle of Wight) because the water acts as a barrier to the terrestrial perambulations of the killer plants. UK's islandness – in relation to 'mainland' Europe has clearly shaped national notions of identity, security and politics (Greenough 2004). Any 'bridging' of the watery divide was always controversial, for example with early versions of the Channel Tunnel rejected due to fear of surprise attack (Fig 1). The Islandness of the UK obviously still looms large in the contemporary politics of 'Brexit' and the UK's relationships with mainland Europe.

The question of 'to bridge' or not to the mainland remains a vexed one with clashes between the economic development of social 'modernity' and more traditional senses of islandness. The development of linking causeways and bridges in the Highland archipelagos, some already mentioned, bring a tension between modernity and island identity that has played out elsewhere too.

There are some who have swapped their birthright
for a stretch of tar.
A bridge that will allow their cars
to link with roads
that lace mainlanders together,
permitting islands to become
like a landlocked place.
Surrendering their separateness
to loop with these larger shores,
becoming both part
and prisoners of the whole.

Bridge to Valentia by Donald S. Murray (Murray 2003)

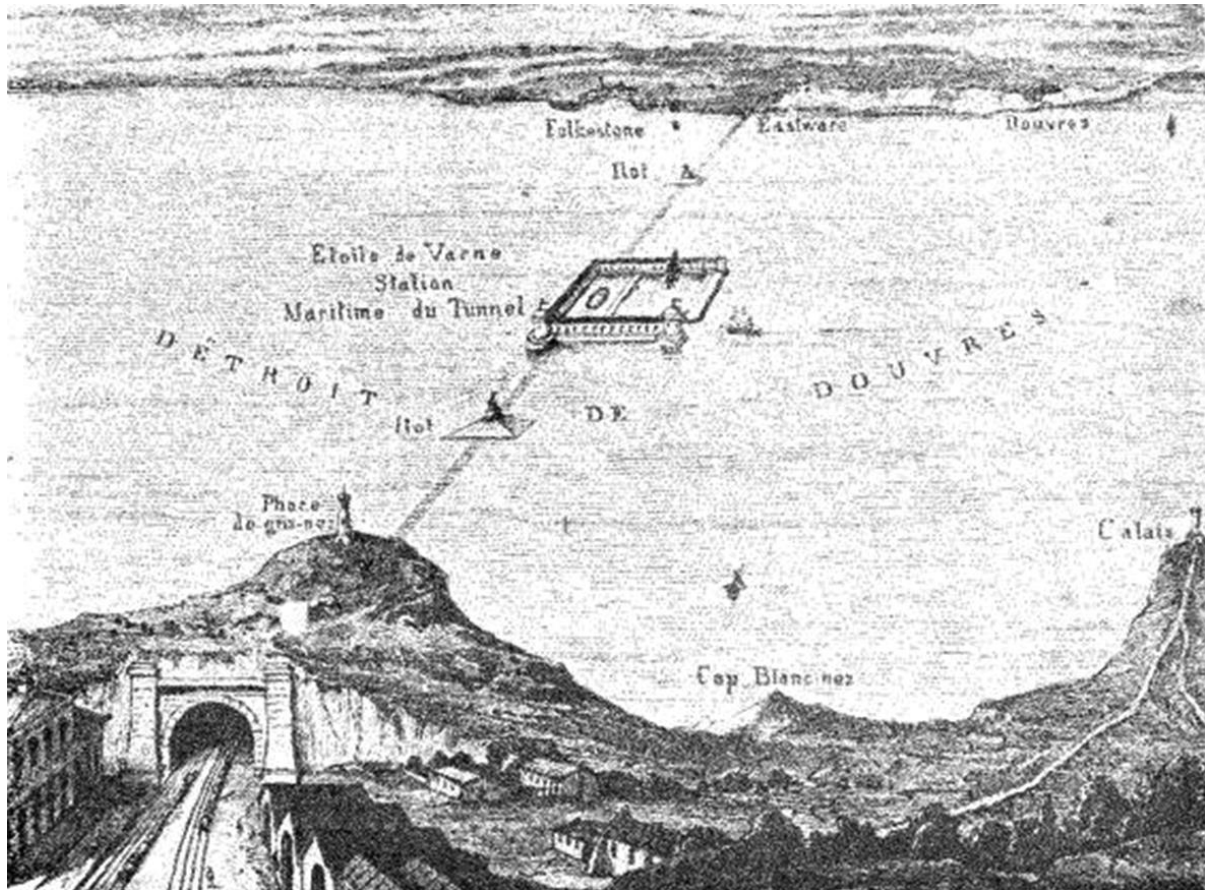


Figure: Historic versions of a channel tunnel from France to England were met with great hostility due to the breaching of the UK's island status and the supposed security it offered (Creative Commons licence).

Here though, the focus is on smaller islands – which sees the UK as an archipelago of many islands, with the main island itself the ‘mainland’, the centre of gravity for economy and culture. The spatial and numerical extent of this archipelago has often been overlooked but is now receiving renewed political, economic and cultural attention. There are ninety nine populated small islands in the territory of Scotland alone (Kevin McKenna 2016). After decades of benign – or even more sinister - neglect by government they are undergoing something of a cultural, social and economic resurgence as people, some returning ‘natives’ and others seek out non-mainland life (ibid). A series of technical (e.g. wave energy) and cultural (island festivals) developments are underway.

To be an island community is, in one sense at least, to be on the margin to the centre of gravity that is the mainland. Particularly the ‘remoter’, wilder, islands of the North and the

West. Scale is not just singular – more a continuum – there are isles that see other islands themselves as the ‘mainland’ see, for example, Cholawo’s account of life on an ‘Island on the Edge’ - Soay – which sees the Isle of Skye as the mainland.

(LD) With my one year old son and husband I moved to Mull for three months (1996) to work with Mull Little Theatre. We lived in a static caravan. I toured the Islands with the theatre company –whilst my husband cared for our son. Many, vivid memories; a strong sense from islanders of unique identity between islands, throughout the tour. Strongest on Barra and Benbecula – that notion that Skye, Mull et al were ‘mainland by proxy’

Islands seem to offer possibilities that are off-set, or ‘other’ to mainland life. The Pictish Trail (a musical performer’s name) writes of living on the isle of Eigg (Hebrides Scotland)

[The] process of removing yourself from mainland life is exhilarating. [] there *is* a sense of escape [] time to think [] time to breathe and be still. Silence to make decisions, calm to make plans. (2014: 30, emphasis added).

As McKenna (2016, online) confirms, ‘there are opportunities in these places to detach yourself from the world, but to remain in touch all year round.’

The Pictish Trail admits to not being too enmeshed in the nature and landscape of the island (as many resident/writers/artists are) but more in the other time and other space of it.

In literature – as Beth Greenough (2004) points out, islands have been used as ‘social and cultural laboratories’ to explore narratives of the consequence of isolation and the production of alternative social orders (Such as in *Lord of the Flies*, *The Tempest*, *Brave New World*).

There are complex interacting psycho, social and physical geographies of peripheries. It often struck me (OJ) as curious how the Northern and Western coastal fringes of the UK, The Celtic Fringe, are much more ragged and fragmentary in topographical terms – as if the land itself is breaking up as one moves away from the centres of gravity of power, politics and population (in some senses at least) of the much more contiguous South East Britain and its proximity to Europe. Or the land has been ripped up by the wildness of the climate. If we

think back to the inversion of Northness outlined in the Introduction to the volume we might be prompted to consider what history would be like the other way around? (Fig 2).

These places are not only a long way from the centre of economic and political (and cultural in some senses) gravity. That distance is exacerbated by their islandness and the fragmentary nature of the land.



Figure: What if the northern Western Isles were the South-East Isles, neighbouring mainland Europe? (Creative Commons licence).

Another writer, talking of her life on Eigg, shares in the exhilaration of island life but more through the nature of the place - which makes her 'heart sing'. In her accounts of outdoor working she says 'when I pause for breath and raise my eyes, I can't help but drink in the

scenery with a covetous thirst. Nature's stark elegance is a restorative draught' (Boden 2014; 10). But this resident is also mindful of the challenges of island life. The community closeness is both a 'solace *and* an awful thing' (ibid, emphasis added).

To be Modern is to be apparently separate from nature – to overcome it. In Latour's (1993) terms modernity rests on 'purification' - creating two entirely distinct ontological zones: that of human beings / the social on the one hand; that of nonhumans on the other, with the disastrous fallout - 'the monsters' as Latour says - that follow.

Of course the nature-culture divide is an illusion and as Timothy Ingold says 'no-one yet has made the crossing from nature to society, or vice versa, and no-one ever will. There is no such boundary to be crossed. (Ingold 2005: 508). Thus, whilst crossing the sound, or some other body of water, to an island might feel a bit like 'getting away from it all', 'getting back to nature', that does not stand up to scrutiny from this point of view. All land is 'uncommon ground' of nature-culture assemblage as Cronon (1996) said. But there is something going on – for sure – affective adjustments, cultural resonances.

We are entirely ecological in terms of being in and of nature through our bodies as systems of intake and output and in how they articulate distance, time, heat, cold, hunger, thirst. We are all in a very real sense, bodies of water, in the constitutional, the genealogical and the geographical sense (Neimanis 2012: 87) and the relationship between the human body of water and the island and water merits further consideration. We are in the world and the world is always mobile in a range of registers. Although we are never separated from nature we can be distanced from aspects of it. For example Ingold sets out how modern life, is increasingly removed from the rhythms of nature;

Traditionally, people had to *fall in* with rhythms of their environment: with the winds, the tides, the needs of domestic animals, the alternations of day and night, of the seasons, and so on, in accordance with what the environment afforded for the conduct of their daily tasks (Ingold 2000: 325-6)

To be on an island – live on an island – look off an island – or onto it – is, to some extent at least, to be more forcefully reminded of nature as space and time – the inimical challenge to the unmediated human body of stretches of cold, current and tide animated seas. The bare fact of land surrounded by sea has implications.

Of course it is not a simple story of more distance, more marginalisation. As Kinossian and Grillitsch (2016) put it

While remoteness and peripherality often overlap, these two phenomena should not be seen in a direct causal relationship. We understand peripheralisation as a process caused predominantly by economic, political, and cultural (rather than physical) factors. Although physical remoteness appears to be a lasting condition, it is not eternal, as accessibility can change with natural factors (e.g., climate change) and/or advances in transportation or communication technologies. While remoteness is considered a hindrance to economic development, remote locations may have advantages of access to valuable resources and strategic regions (e.g., Svalbard as a gateway to the Arctic). (Kinossian and Grillitsch 2016: online)

I (OJ) live almost in west central England (a few hours' drive to the very midpoint of England) – but our broadband is dire. Some 'remoter' areas of the UK (e.g. part of Cornwall) supported by European Union funding – have far superior connectivity. As the virtual/digital world becomes more important – this changes the dynamics of remoteness and the possibilities of cultural and economic innovation. What the island comes to mean in our imaginary, perhaps evoking a future different from our present, then, is evident in the way the island functions as a horizon. This is the topic of the next section, which explore how islands are viewed in visual culture

Views over the Sound

The idea of islandness is a compelling one for the 'geographical imagination' and the 'geographical gaze' in a number of ways. Simply being on an island and looking off, either just to a sea horizon, or to some other land, -perhaps across a sound, or to gaze upon an island from the main land – or neighbouring island. Such views over water - to other lands, or sea horizon are deeply iconic and compelling. (Fig 3)

Figure: The iconic view over the Sound as used in a recent island-focused publication (An Antidote to Indifference, a Caught by the River Publication, May 2014).
[image removed for this version of the article]

Sebald – albeit talking about an island in a lake (Lac de Binn – Switzerland) recounts when it first came into view in a walk through the woods of the area:

I [] sat there for an hour or more lost in thought at the sight, resolving that at the earliest opportunity I would cross over to the island in the lake, which, on that autumn day, was flooded with a pale and trembling light (2014; 39).

He later tells how he visited the island - ‘with a circumference of some two miles’ (41) – only to find it had been a place of both exile, retreat and refuge for Jean-Jacques Rousseau. This reminds us the water that can make islands places of retreat, can also make them islands of imprisonment or social trap (figures 4 and 5).



Figure: Gazing off an island to open sea. Island as prison (Napoleon on The Isle of Saint Helena). Napoléon à Sainte-Hélène, by François-Joseph Sandmann (Creative Commons licence).

Figure : Gazing off an island to other land. Island as social trap. Cover of the novel Islands, by Gwyn Gb. *[image removed for this version of the article]*

I (OJ) soon realised though, in my trips to some northern isles as part of the project this book stems from, a stranger might not know quite what is an island, or an isthmus, in the complex archipelagos of places like Orkney. This adding yet further layers of wonder and ‘lostness’ in what Solnit calls ‘the blue of the distance’ (2006). The flexing light and space in the atmosphere and as reflected in the water – the colours and textures of which sweep and turn, animate the affective resonance of such views.

This notion of ‘affecting views’ across sounds and similar bodies of water, of course, is not such an original observation. Such views and the sentiments they engender are common in a whole range of artistic expressions, from songs and painting to literature and poems. Here we offer a generally autotopographical exploratory account of why this may be so for us. This is in part a simple reaction to what we see as the deeply tragic condition of modern life. The era of Ecocide as set out by Guattari where modernity is stripping out the life and beauty of the world.

To belong to place, to ‘dwell’, as famously set out by Ingold (building on the phenomenological philosophies of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty) seems increasingly challenging in a world of ‘non-places’ (Augé 1992). Perhaps it is just more possible in an island setting to do so. It is more difficult for a small island to become a ‘non-place’ of modernity due to the topographical and topological implications of land and sea.

The poet and landscape writer Kathleen Jamie (who has written about visits to Scottish Isles) said she was jealous when a student told her that in the Shetland dialect there is a word for childhood/spiritual homelands – “Bonhoga”

I was envious, [I thought] I haven’t got one, and I want one. And then I thought about it, and thought – there is nothing I can think of except the back lane where we played, behind the houses, and there is a particular old tyre tree at the bottom of the lane, and I thought - that tree, that was my Bonhoga (2016).

In essence, in some ways, we so want to be some place else - away from mainland modernity. Islands seem – we are sure somewhat naively – to offer the chance to be elsewhere. But there is of long history of islands as place of escape, of place to build new systems of thinking and being. For example Eigg is now a community owned island with avowedly ‘utopian’ ideals. As explored in Murdo Macdonald’s contribution earlier in this collection, the Community of Iona is a contemporary development of original efforts to create a religious, craft based form of community against the conditions of mid-twentieth century urban Glasgow (See Iona Community 2016). Retreats which were outposts on remote islands have been critical to the development of Christian/religious thought in the UK and beyond. Liptrot’s (2016) account of returning to live on Orkney after a life of excess in London is framed by retreating to the wild margins, and to isolation and nature to recover mental and physical health.

Views over water – (onto isles – off isles) are stirring *affectively* rather than simply emotionally. Longing (future), remembering (past) fold together, with bodily reactions to space, maybe height, and the intractability of water. Here and there, home and away, there and here, away and home. Neimanis (2012) articulates a set of relationships with water that closes the distance between our bodies and bodies of water in some senses but this needs to be seen in relation to the distances and barriers water can present to bodies.

The space between ourselves and our others is at once as distant as the primeval sea, yet also closer than our own skin – the traces of those same oceanic beginnings still cycling through us, pausing as this bodily thing we call ‘mine’. Water is between bodies, but of bodies, before us and beyond us, yet also very presently this body, too. (2012: 85)

The relationship between island and mainland is one of complexity. Subordination – dependence yet also part independence. Gazing once at the island of Caldey a short distance off the Pembrokeshire coast, on a very hot still summer’s day, sea dazzling and calm, I (OJ) had the sense that the island was a calf, sleeping near, but a bit away from, its mother the mainland on the blue sheet of the sea, for coolness.

In the light, all detail of the island was lost bar its fact of being there. Always this view is in one way the same – the island is there, in others – always different. The light of the land – and of the sea. This flexing of light does seem to make the island move, seeming something

very close and clear, other times hazy and far off. Also as one moves along the shore there is a striking parallax – that they too are on the move across the surface of the sea.

As Philip Gross writes in the collection of poems *The Water Table* of a small island in the Bristol channel

The Moveable Island

“...shifts, like the hull of the boat
left drifting, grounded on a different shoal
each morning, in the midway, out
where the Severn is letting, has let,
itself go into the sea, like a thought into sleep
no wonder the island
keeps it distances. Its reticences. Whichever
shore you look from, it seems closer to the other”

Philip Gross – The Moveable Island, from the *Water Table* (2009)



Figure: Recent view of Caldey (Photograph: Owain Jones).

A view over some sound or other or onto an island, or off an island, always has the idea of *passage* in it, either explicitly or implicitly, and passages remembered, or longed for, or dreaded – or just routine. The act of transitioning, at times its travails, plays to the notion of the island as an alternative, perhaps non-modern space.

Passages

The easing and speeding of mobility of people, animals, plants and goods has been one of the hallmarks of modernity and globalisation. Water has played its full part in this. For example the shipping container has been called one of the game changing technologies of the 20th century enabling mass global trading by sea. In a sense this is not a new story as ships bore the very earliest traders and explorers, invaders and migrants, around coasts and across seas and up rivers. Movement over sea was often easier, in some respects, especially to cultures which had refined crafts and routes and navigation skills, to that over land. Islands were fulcrums in such networks, the islands off Scotland for example being centres, long before they were peripheries, as Martin-Jones observes in this collection

It has been pointed out that Orkney, rather than being imagined as a remote outpost can be imagined as a busy, central, hub of patterns of movements around the northern coasts of Europe and beyond. But bodies of water still offer, in many ways, those implacable barriers to the movement of the human body and related freight. The tragic scenes of refugees trying to cross the Mediterranean to reach Europe in small crafts are testament to that. To stand at the water's edge is, for many at least to stand in one sense at the edge of the practical world. A passage of some kind is required. The passage, the journey, becomes itself an affective artefact, an episode in itself, but also a threshold, a transition.

As Pictish Trail writes of life on Eigg

I find the journey itself is a vital part of the island psyche. As the Scotrail carriage creaks and moans, wheezes and shudders into Highland stations, I always make sure I sit facing away from the direction of travel, so that it feels like my life is rewinding back. Rewinding to a happier me, a calmer me'. (2014 30)

Boden observes of the boat ride part of this journey.

The final leg of the journey is an hour-long boat ride across the waters of the Minch. On a bad day, as the waves spray your face with brine and tourists splatter the deck with vomit, the 15 miles feel interminably longer' (2014 10).

The ferries and their timetables are 'big things' in island life and the subject to media attention in times of uncertainty.

Isles folk consider they are a forgotten area," Mr Henderson said. "There is a fear in the isles that if ferry services are cut, they will be tied to their home patch for a significant part of the day. Young people will be the first to vote with their feet. (Riddell 2012, online)

Now air travel might be seen to have overridden this water profundity to some extent – and it has – to some extent – for the isles large enough to support an airport. . But their airports are inevitably small and thus the planes are small. And it is often windy in these latitudes, and with huge western fetches of the north Atlantic ocean. So island air travel is not the routine, almost completely denaturalised process that is larger scale commercial air travel. Indeed it is a delightful fact that the airport on Barra uses the beach at low tide as a runway

Figure: Barra Airport. Even air travel to and from islands has a precarity due to weather (Photograph: Richard Bottle). *[image removed for this version of the article]*

Passage #1(OJ)

Orkney's airport is a small modern industrial type shed, a bit way out of town with a modest car park and a bus top. It's not a place to spend a lot of time at – but then – you don't have too. It's got the sweetest baggage reclaim. A tiny little conveyor belt - with a display of old fishing sailing gear piled in the middle.

Me and my fellow passengers queue briefly at the door and then walk in a straggly line to the plane out on the runway. We all *lean*, clinging onto scarfs, coats and hats. Everything lose billows. It is VERY WINDY.

We settle into the small 30 seat twin prop plane. It is rocking in the wind. I am not scared - but a bit enlivened, a strong wind is no more of a problem to a well-made plane and skilled pilot (one assumes he is skilled – it is a he – you can see him) than it is to one of the sea birds. A chance for some yawing.

But in mid-taxi we stop. Hmm. The pilot says something like “apologies for the delay, the plane is overweight. We are going to have to reduce weight by de-catering”. The term “de-catering” distracts me for a moment from this new situation. The plane is carrying too much weight (to be safe one assumes). The front door – I am near it so can see the action – is ‘de-armed’ and then opened. The wind again becomes audible and visible as it rattles the coat of the member of ground crew come to de-cater the plane.

I swear – the stewardess – whose complete sense of everyday work was reassuring – handed him two smallish boxes of biscuits, then the door was banged shut – as if against the wind. and then we proceeded through the routines again and took off. The plane bumping, jumping and sliding (yawing) through the chewy topography of the wind. No biscuits due to high wind was used skilfully by the stewardess as a bit of fun on the short trip.

I later learnt that we were the last to leave the island that day. All further flights were cancelled as wind speeds deepened. The ferries had been cancelled much earlier on. A number of our party who had chosen to travel that way spent another night in the Stromness hotel. They had I reckoned been ‘islanded’

Mike Russell a Scottish politician, talking of the myths and realities of island life in the north felt that dealing with such weather incidences was one of the major ‘characteristics of island life’

In all my years living among islanders and dealing with them I have found them not to be any different than anyone else. The myth of curious and strange island ‘ways’ is just

that – a myth. Certainly, you need to be possessed of a degree of endurance to prevail in climatic extremes, but there are great rewards too. (Russell quoted in Mckenna 2016, online)

Islands, small islands in particular, enforce attention to local geographies of the seasons, the seas, the tides and the weathers. Howells (1961) in charting the struggles and triumphs of the last man to farm on the island of Skomer (South West Wales), describes the challenges of getting to the island by small boat.

From the mainland it probably looks simple enough. But this is not to reckon with the vagaries of the Jack Sound and the difficulties of landing open boats on pebbly beaches [] Between the Wooltack point and Skomer lies the little island know as Midland. Between the latter and the Wooltack point is the notorious Jack Sound, a stretch of open water about six hundred yards in extent. It is at its worst in times of spring tides and at high and low water. When the tide is on the flow it comes up across the bay and drives north through the bottleneck of the Jack Sound. The tremendous weight of water being forced through ensures that there is plenty of action to the north side where the Skomer crossing is made. [] Further complication arises when the wind comes down from the north or north-east, as it often does in summer , and tumbles the fast travelling waves [] over and over as it blows against them (1961 17)

What the island enables, in its imaginary horizon, and its disruptive transitioning, is an affective transformation of space and time.

Islands as Affective Space

I have finally arrived at island time. [] My focus has changed now. The island is no longer quite so small. The rocks have become cliffs, the creek a ravine (Freud, 2003; 2).

Vannini and Taggart (2013) suggest of a residential island on the West coast of Canada:

Its islandness emerges from the ways inhabitants act, from the unique textures of place, from the ways these textures affect us and the way we affect them. Islandness, from this perspective, is thus less of an abstract property, less of a construction or a symbolic source of identity, and more of an affective experience and practice.

Islandness is, therefore, not simply the sense of place typical of islands, but also the multiple ways through which relations among inhabitants, and between islands and their dwellers, are practiced. Such organic understanding of islandness is the active and creative unfolding of social and material rapports, an unfolding through which islandness emerges in multiple shapes, each shape in relation to the connections that give it rise. Vannini and Taggart (2013)

As Pitchish Tail (2014:10) concludes his article ‘There is no greater pleasure than finding a place where you can feel comfortable in yourself, grow a good beard, and complete a set of tasks, undisturbed. Now let me get back to my Morrissey videos’.

Marland (2016) drawing, as Wylie (2012) does, on Robinson’s writings on the West of Ireland coast coins the term ‘psycho-archipelagraphy’. She sets out Robinson’s in depth discussions of the terrains, his movements, responses to and narratives of the terrain as expressions of ecocritical notions of dwelling, investigating the ways in which Robinson’s approach both reflects and moves beyond them in ways which distinguish it from these traditions of landscape writing.

These aspects include its polyphonic form, which incorporates, amidst long passages of detailed representational writing, elements of pastiche, parody, and metatextual commentary, and its performative character, whereby the books not only provide us with a literary exploration of the idea of dwelling and the ‘good step’, but at the same time cumulatively enact Robinson’s own performance of his attempt at that step. This enactment involves a dialectical movement in which episodes of disappointment and disorientation alternate with moments of reinvigoration and stepping onwards. (Marland 2016)

Robinson is not after all really seeking to build *without contradiction* those “broad-eaved Heideggerian dwellings” (*Setting Foot* vi) he speaks of, but to work dialectically and performatively, with his ‘good step,’ through those very contradictions that characterise our being-in-the-world. While undoubtedly drawing on Romantic legacies of landscape writing, Robinson also scrutinises and critiques them. Likewise, the commitment to carrying out an intensely detailed account of Árainn—which might, in contemporary terms, be seen as an archipelagic approach—does not prevent him from disclosing moments of profound psychic disorientation and disappointment. The Aran diptych thus constitutes the advent of an extraordinarily innovative form of landscape writing.

Conclusions: Trouble on the Mainland and Islands as opportunities for becoming non-Modern

I (OJ) have claimed in this chapter that to be on an island – particularly a remote northern / western isle is to be, in some senses at least, on the margins in relation to the centres of power (political, economic). That is probably quite obvious, but the full extent of the complexities and possibilities which stem from this are less so.

Vannini and Taggart (2013) claim for their paper on the practices of islandness that it is a 'minority paper' in so far as they live on the island in question. Not on the mainland. They address the practices of islandness 'corporeally, affectually, practically, intimately, as a visceral experience.' And, they add, they seek to develop a 'non-representational idea of dwelling, in which inhabitants, we believe, incorporate a place not by way of mental design or blueprints, or by way of signifying comparisons and juxtapositions, but rather by sheer practical, creative, skilful engagement with its affordances.'

Northern (and Western) Isles can be seen as on the margins – peripheries in some senses – away from the social centres of gravity – just in terms of sheer numbers or residents. But perhaps this offers opportunities. When on Lindisfarne, our guide apologised that the first part of our walk would be through tourists – people – the implication being the island experience would start once we were on the remoter, unpopulated, eastern dunes.

Now we imagine remoteness throws up challenges. We don't live in these places so it is not for me to speak too certainly of their dwelling and potentials – or otherwise. But to define islands in terms of lack - lack of economic, social and cultural critical masses (or just plain facilities), as they are in some literatures (seems very problematic to me. For example, see Royle (2001)

To be on the margins may offer opportunities as well as challenges. More importantly - for me - to be on the margins of the modern world is an attractive proposition in so far as the Modern world is highly problematic in a whole host of inter-connected eco-social ways. As Latour and many others have said – the history of the 'mainland' West is a disaster, a deep, ongoing tragedy. Various people and groups are deliberately trying to live marginally from this troubled 'mainland'. For example certain forms of alternative rural and urban self-sufficiency groups. They try to be cultural islands *within* the mainland. To be on an actual island might cut both ways in this respect. A ground of isolation, a ground for alternatives.

Being on the margins it might be possible to see and do things differently – out of choice and out of necessity. Are islands spaces of potential non-modern becoming? (Renewable?)

As Baldacchino (2007) summarises in the abstract of his paper on islands and novelty

Being on the edge, being out of sight and so out of mind, exposes the weakness of mainstream ideas, orthodoxies, and paradigms and foments alternatives to the status quo. Islands are thus propelled as sites of innovative conceptualizations, whether of nature or human enterprise, whether virtual or real. They stand out as sites of novelty; they tend toward clairvoyance; they are disposed to act as advance indicators or extreme reproductions of what is present or future elsewhere.

It should therefore come as no surprise to us that islands, both real and earthy as much as concocted, or even those occupying the fuzzy space in between, stand out as sites of novelty, of coy experimentation, of deliberate or coincidental path-breaking events. These are some of the many diverse roles that islands perform as objects of representation. In fulfilling these functions, human action, human imagination, and nature act in concert. We are mindful that this question applies - sort of - to devolution – independence - for Scotland - Wales, Cornwall.

Once we understand islandness as a type of situated affect or feeling, islandness can then be examined in concrete contextual detail as a ‘mode of active, perceptual engagement,’ a way of being in touch with your island. Islandness gives form to your island. In other words, the ‘meaning’ of your island resides in its very sense of place. It is the shape taken by how you dwell on your island, by the ways you have become socialized to understand and appreciate its sounds, sights, textures, flavours, and scents, by the ways inhabitants’ sensibilities may differ from others,’ by the lessons and intuitions they have acquired in adapting to their place, by their orientations to movement, rest, and encounter, their speeds, and rhythms. Thus, the life of your island is the sum total of the sensations it gives rise to, the cumulative incorporation of those feelings carved into its soils and shores, and the embodiment of its affective spaces on its dwellers. (Vannini and Taggart 2013)

So islandness as outlined here as a mode of engagement might prompt us all (islanders, island inhabitants/wayfarers/ mainlanders) to consider or reinvent other decentralised, sustainable ways of being for the present. The larger political potential of seeing islands in this way is we hope an asset.

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